

ECHOCHAMBERS OF SANITY

By Howard Goldman

I am concerned the pace and scope of “perceived” change in our lives is often overwhelming. My long-cherished beliefs are routinely upended and proven “wrong” (i.e. what is healthy; what is moral; what is reasonable at work, what is expected in relationships, what are the lessons from received history) “Everything we know is wrong” is humor, but not far off the mark of my thwarted sense of reality.

You and I inhabit echo-chambers of self-reflected opinion - points of view narrowed by “personalization filters”, and media content that titillates, provokes, and enflames inner rage. Increasingly, I fortify existing beliefs by selecting “news” and discussion that conforms to what I already believe or, worse, want to believe. Debate is a contest to steel my argument tighter and more dominantly, rather than an opportunity to inform and expand what I understand. I demand agreement for what I already “know”.

I see diversity of thought simplistically portrayed and often imposed in commercial imagery - as long as our preferences for diversity are sanctioned along pre-conceived notions of inclusion. My authenticity is subsumed in someone’s smug and presumptive unity of values. Oh, how correct, how superior *we* are!

Against this often un-examined cultural backdrop I strive to function, and dare I say, prosper. How can you and I carve out *islands of sanity* in swirls of unnerving chaos and opaque anxiety?

I have chosen a few personal practices that offer the promise of momentary sanity:

Reading and reflection

I arise each day carving out an hour or so for personal contemplation and reflection. I feed my curiosity about almost anything – reviews of books and films after I have experienced them, political discourse, insight into people I encounter. I “Google” almost every question that I conjure in my head in search of objective information. I work to broaden my basis of understanding, even if it conflicts with smug assumptions. On some self-satisfied days, I approach intellectual honesty.

I also establish a rhythm for each day that is chosen, not imposed by circumstance. I initiate a clearing for discovery and achievement. This framework allows me to engage in the world, newly each day, primed for sanity.

Preparation and grooming

Don't laugh! I would climb Mt. Everest if I could take a hot shower before daily assents. Call it ionization, improving circulation, or hygiene – I consider this ritual a sacred “reboot” of my systems to produce vitality and restore my factory settings.

Grooming and how I dress reflects my sense of dignity. This notion may have fallen out of favor, however to present myself as how I want to be regarded by others anchors self-respect and social responsibility. It was once regarded as the hallmark of being a Gentleman.

Exercise and conditioning

Without health and vitality, the rest of my life would be severely compromised. This is especially true as years unfold and reveal what I take for granted: the invisible foundation of well-being.

I learned that daily vigorous exercise is the essential pre-condition for contributing to sustainable health. Dedication, planning, and discipline renew my daily triumph of will over inertia.

What I put in my mouth effects what comes out of my mouth – thoughts, emotions, and ideas. It is an evolving formula to find right individual balance here. Overcoming my addictions and mindless eating habits requires overriding cravings that seemingly own me. “Eat light, feel right!”

Social outreach and shared ideation

Friends are hard to find and even harder to nurture over time. The longer I live, I feel an increasingly brittle separation from connections once effortlessly established in my formative years.

I actively develop communication with family and long established friends. This takes intent and outreach. I have learned, sometimes painfully, if I want friends I must be a friend. When I think of someone, I now act to translate that random notion into caring emails or calls, invitations, acknowledgements.

I look for opportunities to set-up personal meetings to share quality ideas with existing acquaintances, or cultivate new relationships. The key for me is to engage with others without attempting to “get” something from them, or conduct a transaction. The simple joy of sharing ideas and receiving the perspective of others, without wanting to change them, is satisfying and enlivening.

Learning and new skills

Sanity, is not stable, it is a dynamic, growing process. I make lists of what I want to learn or create. New experience is more meaningful for me than acquiring material things. Exercising learning muscles develops long-admired capabilities: simple expressions of Italian, Spanish and Japanese, photography and travel blogging, expanding distinctions for opera and classical music, forming a book club to return to the joys of the written word.

When I press into new learning, I forget about time, and lose myself in what seems like liberating play. Most satisfying is to complete long-standing, floating desires. and enrich my sense of substance and accomplishment.

Old dogs can learn new tricks!

Professional practice and innovation

I will always work. The secret for me is to have my expressions of work be at choice – to balance work with recreation, with travel, and relationship. Then fulfillment and self-worth are woven into areas of accomplishment and contribution. My relationship to work is a renewable creation – a personal art form. Management consulting and performance coaching in business is performance art for me – it is never fully predictable; I must bring my best to inspire what is great in people, it is alive, frightening, and enormously fulfilling when promises are realized.

So, what can I uniquely continue to provide that a well-programmed robot, designed to obsolete me, can't or won't?

Courage in the face of comforting routine is my key to innovation. My default mechanism is to retreat to the predictable illusions of what worked last time. As change redefines my circumstance, generating new possibilities is my navigational toolkit for renewal and relevance in the emerging marketplace of ideas. Listening to my audience is essential for a trueing signal.

Domestic life and enjoying what I have

Einstein was asked what he would do if informed of imminent nuclear attack: "Tend my garden" he replied without hesitation. The Chinese say "carrying water and chopping wood". How do I find gratification in the chores of everyday existence?

I love shopping for fresh food, cooking it with love and flair, and relishing the sanctity of the evening table with my family. I regard cooking as consumable art; mealtime is church; it is contentment in simplicity. And the universe reciprocates – my wife loves to do the dishes!

I love where I live, with whom I live, and what I do....and, I work at it.

Entertainment and appreciation of the arts.

We live not by bread alone. I love the best of TV, film, most forms of music, opera, symphony, theater, sports, literature, magazines, restaurants, galleries, parks, architecture, civic happenings, fashion, merchandising, marketing, communication mastery, museums, photography, art, collecting, observing, listening, analyzing, and enjoying what others create.

This is not selfish indulgence, it is my curation of the vast treasures given to us by Mozart, Leonard Cohen, Frank Lloyd Wright, Robert Moses, Stanley Kubrick, Tom Stoppard, Issey Miyake, Steve Jobs, Daniel Boulud – a cultural fabric of appreciation and taste. It is what gives my life texture, depth, and acquired meaning. It provides replenish-able joy, and it is accessible to us all.

Travel and cultural discovery.

Travel is an acquired art, and logistic skill. It may not be for everyone. For me travel is the footstones I tread as I cross through the stream of life. Travel awakens my senses, it reshapes and brings into sharp contrast what I take for granted, what I am blind to in commonplace surroundings.

When I travel for work I interact with people from diverse backgrounds, introducing tools and approaches to build something worthwhile, in currency of their concerns. I see universal challenges and solutions and appreciate the uniqueness of cultures behind superficial clichés.

Personal travel is not a luxury for me, it is a necessary commitment. I get to *pretend to be* Italian, German, Japanese, or a resident of Santa Fe. I assimilate new surroundings, even for a few days or a week, and walk at their pace, reside in their sensibilities, their world. It is meaningful fantasy and it enriches my spirit.

Comfort, intimacy and restoration

At the end of day, the fulfillment of work, the conclusion of the journey, I want to return to what I have built in my life that comforts and restores me. It is about intimate connections that warm the soul – simply watching a Netflix movie with my wife, and holding hands. It is where I return to nourish my spirit and my body.

Peaceful and plentiful sleep is my cornerstone for regeneration and immunity to many threats to vitality, Sleep is where I invent tomorrow and underwrite my stamina to fulfill that future.

All of these practices are located and replenished in my conscious expressions of gratitude.

I am grateful for my *islands of sanity* - discovered, nurtured, and protected with my life. They are offered as guideposts to create yours.